DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 282 334 EA 019 431

AUTHOR Surratt, James E.
TITLE Passing a Bond Issue.
PUB DATE 23 Feb 87.
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of School Administrators (New Orleans, LA, February 20-23, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Bond Issues; Educational Finance; Elementary Secondary Education; Enrollment Trends; Financial Support; Fund Raising; *Needs Assessment; *Parent Participation; *Public Relations; *School Business Relationship; *School Community Relationship; Volunteers
IDENTIFIERS *Volusia County Schools FL

ABSTRACT

Like many other Central Florida districts, Volusia County School District is growing rapidly, increasing by 1,500 to 2,000 students (and 60 new classrooms) per year. The area has a solid senior citizen voting block and a state tax structure based on very low property taxes, a 5 percent sales tax, and no income tax. Since state monies for new construction are limited, the school board decided to press for a $112 million bond issue. The campaign involved the following strategies: (1) demonstrating that good schools and quality education contribute heavily to a community's well-being and economic development; (2) targeting the "yes" vote; (3) promising not to raise school construction taxes over the next five years; and (4) promising to air-condition every school in the district. The decision to introduce a bond issue only five years after passing a $60 million bond election was based on documented need, a positive attitude survey, and faith in support from the business community. The campaign began with formation of a citizens' committee of business leaders and volunteers to do fundraising, contribute monies, and promote the bond program. A committee of Parent Teacher Association leaders and school advisory members was created to bring the campaign to the school level. Other campaign aspects are briefly summarized. The Volusia bond issue passed by a four-to-one margin. (MLH)

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PASSING A BOND ISSUE

James E. Surratt

Superintendent of Schools
Volusia County School District
230 North Stone Street
DeLand, Florida 32720

February 23, 1987

Presentation at the American Association
of School Administrators (AASA) Convention
(New Orleans, Louisiana, February 20-23, 1987).

EA 019 431

REMARKS OF DR. JIM SURRATT

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS NATIONAL CONFERENCE

FEBRUARY 19-23, 1987

I am happy to be with you today to share a success story...a story with a fairytale ending about a community pulling together to do what is right for children. Our story can be compared to that of the old woman and the shoe who had so many children she didn't know what to do.

While many school districts throughout the nation are facing declining student populations, and are seeing their school buildings turned into senior citizen housing or recreation centers, Volusia County, Florida, faces an entirely different problem.

Like many districts in Florida, Volusia County is growing rapidly, with many young parents and their prerequisite 2.4 school age children leading the influx. Our student population is increasing at between 1500 and 2000 students per year, requiring a minimum of 60 new classrooms and at least two new elementary schools every year.

Volusia County, located on the east coast of central Florida, with Daytona Beach as its largest city, counts approximately 314,000 citizens as residents. It is a large county in size, covering about 1200 square miles. Our school system is countywide, serving 40,100 students this year, and employing about 4800 instructional and support staff. Many senior citizens call Volusia County home, and they are a significant voting block.

Compounding the problem of rapid growth, is a state tax structure based on local property taxes which are among the lowest in the nation, a five per cent sales tax and no income tax at all.

Obviously, state monies for new construction are very limited. The State of Florida is currently looking at 8 billion dollars of school construction needs over the next ten years and very few options for raising that money.

That is why many school districts in Florida have turned to local bond issues as the only way to meet the building crunch.

The School Board of Volusia County opted to go to the voters for a 112 million dollar bond issue. The campaign was based on the following fundamentals:

* an effort to demonstrate that good schools and quality education are essentials to a community's well being and the economic development of that community.
* an effort to target the "yes" vote
* a promise not to raise school construction taxes over the next five years
* a promise to air-condition every school in the district

Let me start at the beginning. The decision to go for a bond issue five years after passing a 60 million dollar bond election and just two years after a series of newspaper articles accusing the School Board of mismanaging that construction program was a courageous one on the part of the Board.

The Board based its decision on documented need, on a positive attitude survey conducted by a research firm, and on a belief that the business community would be supportive of the project.

The campaign began in September of 1985 in the administrative meeting rooms of the school system where district level administrators planned a nine month strategy. It included comparing the results of the state survey of facilities with recommendations from school level principals and advisory committees as to facilities needs, in order to develop a total needs list. The School Board was ultimately presented with eight different construction plans ranging in cost from 70 million dollars to 130 million dollars.

The Board ultimately decided on a 112 million dollar bond program which included the construction of 6 elementary schools, a middle school, a senior high school, and a vocational center. In addition, renovations and additions at 27 schools and a total air-conditioning program were included in the program.

Trying to assess community support, the School Board commissioned an telephone attitude survey to be completed during January of 1986. The random survey included questions on a wide variety of subjects, and subtly asked whether the voters would support a bond issue. The results were overwhelmingly favorable.

The campaign began with the formation of a citizens' committee comprising business leaders and volunteers. The foremost function of the committee was to raise funds to support the campaign since School Board monies could not be spent other than for informational purposes. However, fundraising was not the only job assigned to our business and civic leaders. The chambers of commerce took the bond program as their own, promoting it within their membership, distributing posters and campaign materials, hosting meetings, contributing monies. Our business

and civic leaders went "on the stump" for us, speaking at Rotary, Kiwanis, and other civic association meetings. They were available when needed and were our greatest supporters.

What makes this all so significant is that prior to 1984 the involvement of the business community in the Volusia County School System was negligible at best. The district suffered from benign neglect. The bond campaign participation is just one aspect of a total metamorphosis which has included the establishment of a support foundation, adopt-a-school programs, educational partners and more. The comforting thing is that when we were ready to go forth for the bond program, we knew that the support of the business community would be forthcoming.

In addition, a committee consisting of PTA leaders and school advisory committee members was created to bring the campaign to the school level, where we felt the opportunity for success was the greatest. Concurrently, volunteer coordinators from geographic regions of the district were selected to recruit and train and manage campaign workers.

The bond campaign included the following other aspects:

** TOTAL COMMITMENT BY EACH AND EVERY SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER AND MEMBER OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF - the campaign was similar to a political campaign in every sense of the word, with precinct captains and workers...principals were an integral part of the campaign.

** A speakers bureau which coordinated programs for virtually every civic and service organization in the county.

** Speakers packets which included transparencies, sample speech, speech outline, statistics, handouts, questions and answers.

** Endorsement letters distributed to the organizations in the community

** Requests for support from the religious community

** Informational forums held at schools throughout the county on an almost daily basis

** A comprehensive media blitz

** Close relationships with the media which resulted in endorsements from all major outlets

** Posters

** Brochures

** Buttons

** Sign wavers on election day reminding people to vote for bonds

** Letters of endorsement sent from major professional and civic organizations to all of their members (medical society, bar association, junior league, League of Women Voters, etc.)

** A paid advertising campaign which included newspaper ads and radio ads

** Bumper Stickers

** Fans saying "Beat the Heat, Vote for Bonds"

** A postcard campaign the last week

** A telephone campaign in which every parent in the school system was called by a member of the PTA or the school advisory committee or volunteer teachers

** Rides to the polls

Our innovative taxing proposal enabled the School Board to assure the voters that support for the bond issue would not bring an increase in taxes for at least five years (at least until the "end of the decade" was the terminology used in our speeches). By reducing the amount of millage in our capital improvement tax (1.5 mills) and increasing the amount of debt service to 2.4 mills, we were able to keep the tax rate at the exact same amount we had taxed the year before. The beauty of the proposal was that as the debt service rate decreased, we could increase the amount of the capital improvement tax to bring in a steady rate of money for capital improvement. This plan is being duplicated in other districts throughout the state.

The fairytale ending to this story is that our bond issue passed by a 4-1 margin. Parents, the business community, and the school community pulled together as never before. A terrific spirit of cooperation and communication was created that has carried through even after the campaign.

Today, an advisory committee consisting of citizens who have expertise in the construction field, meets with our facilities staff on a regular basis. We will bring problems to them and keep them informed of the progress of the building program. We hope to avoid the problems which resulted from our last construction program and to create an atmosphere which will enable us to go to the voters again if and when the need arises.

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